DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 652 UD 023 416

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TITLE	Americans Talking...Listen! How Some Hmong, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese View American Schools.
INSTITUTION	Lane Community Coll., Eugene, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY	Oregon State Dept. of Education, Salem.
PUB DATE	84
NOTE	22p.; Dot matrix print; will reproduce poorly. Transcripts from a videotaped session at the conference "Options: Bridge to English" (Springfield, OR, February 2, 1982).
PUB TYPE	Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Acculturation; Asian Americans; Cultural Differences; *Culture Conflict; Elementary Secondary Education; *Indochinese; *Intercultural Communication; Interpreters; Language Role; Laotians; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent School Relationship; *Refugees; *School Attitudes; Vietnamese People
IDENTIFIERS	Hmong People; Khmer People

ABSTRACT

Three topics were dealt with during this panel discussion on how Hmong, Khmer, Laotian, and Vietnamese refugees see the American school system: (1) the general issues of acculturation and assimilation; (2) conflicts between school and home expectations; and (3) the use of students and other nonprofessionals as interpreters and translators in communication with Southeast Asian refugee families, with emphasis on the need to be aware that among immigrants, English is sometimes used as a source of power. (CMG)

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ED241652

Americans Talking . . . Listen!

How Some Hmong, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese View American Schools

transcripts from a videotaped session at the conference

OPTIONS: Bridge to English
2 February 1982
Springfield, Oregon
sponsored by the Oregon Department of Education

Produced by
Media Productions
Lane Community College
Eugene, Oregon
for
Oregon State Department of Education

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(Transcripts prepared by Mary Blakely, January 1984, Eugene, Oregon)

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PREFACE

This is a transcript of a panel discussion that took place in a general session at a conference on teaching English to speakers of other languages, February 1982. The audience, mostly public school teachers, aides and administrators, had some experience with Southeast Asian refugee students. David Arlington, language specialist for the Oregon State Department of Education, coordinated the conference and organized this session. He asked me to be the moderator and invited the other panel members. His editing of the original full length videotape resulted in three separate videotapes (each approximately 30 minutes), which are transcribed here.

Part One: Assimilation
Part Two: School and Home Expectations
Part Three: Using Students and Families As Interpreters and Translators

The videotapes were designed to be used singly or as a set. Each begins with the same introductory remarks identifying the panel members.

--M.B.

David Arlington:

This session is a presentation from four mental health counselors, a community liaison, and an educational planner who are going to be discussing how they see the American school system and how, in fact, differences in people may only be similarities. Panel members are:

Rath Ben from the Indochinese Cultural and Service Center in Portland
Mary Blakely from the Eugene School District
Bruce Bliatout, Southeast Asian Refugee Federation in Portland
Vinh The Do, Indochinese Cultural and Service Center
Kam One Keopraseuth, Indochinese Cultural and Service Center
Ginlin Woo, from Interface Consultants in Portland

Mary Blakely:

This group met about a month ago to talk about the issue of how Southeast Asian families are experiencing the school system here. As we proceeded in our discussion to prepare for today, it occurred to us that that same discussion was just the way we needed to have you listen in. And so, today we are going to have another discussion. Some of it will be the same as what we talked about earlier, but it is not rehearsed. We are trying very hard to act like we are casual and friendly, because we feel that way, but it will probably take us a while to warm up. I'm going to start with some questions and we will just proceed with the discussion from there.

PART ONE: ASSIMILATION

Mary:

One of the first questions is one that is frequently asked by teachers and others who work with children from Southeast Asia and want to avoid inadvertently hurting the children's feelings. What kind of information can you give us about some of the nonverbal communication patterns? Are there any rules you can give us, or are there not any rules?

Vinh:

In terms of nonverbal communication, I think there are a lot of differences between Vietnamese and Americans. One example is that when I first came to the United States, I was waiting for a bus and I signaled like this [arm raised, palm forward, fingers closed and cupped moving down and up in waving motion] and then the bus driver went away. That's kind of good-bye, for the Americans, but for us that means come here. And at that time, I was very angry. I thought that I was racially discriminated. [audience laughter] But then finally I found out that it was a kind of misunderstanding. And I began to learn more nonverbal expressions from the American country. I think that most of the Indochinese children are ready to learn new things when they come to the new land. And also we know that you are different from us. And also when we know that you are different from us we are tolerant of the differences. The best thing to do is to try to let other people know that you care about them even though you can do something differently than what they expect. But they know that due to different cultures there are different kinds of expression in nonverbal communication.

When I was angry with the bus driver, it was because we did not have any kind of contact any more after that. When I got contact with other Americans even though they have some kinds of verbal or nonverbal expressions that are completely different from our culture, I tolerate that because I know that they care about me, they talk with me and they want to help me. And so, I think that we cannot generalize all kinds of nonverbal skills and try to learn them to try to show to Indochinese or try to understand them. One of the best methods is to be sympathetic and to be flexible, because no way can we learn all of the nonverbal skills from a new culture.

Kam One:

From the Lao culture, there is something that is very distinctive regarding the pattern of parenting and children learning anything from household duties up to classroom activities. It is implanted in the way of relating between parents and child. When we try to teach our children to do things, we don't force them. We don't plan and schedule them in the specific way that American parents do and the way teachers do. We sort of take it easy. Let them observe. Provide model. Wait until they are ready. Assign them a simple task at a time and they learn that way, whether it is cooking or sewing or helping out by taking on a bigger responsibility in the family. The same is true in the school setting, except in a misbehavior kind of situation. Our schools allowed corporal punishment. Sometimes it could be real bad and sometimes it's tolerable and it is accepted by the parents.

Ben:
I would like to mention an important factor. We are dealing with a group of refugees who are here in the U.S. Whatever seemed to be true back then in Cambodia, or Laos or Vietnam or Hmong, it might not be true over here anymore. Because now refugees live in a new environment they are influenced by so many things here in the United States so it might be not good to focus so much on whatever they do back in Cambodia or whatsoever, but put more focus on the Third Culture: what they are going to be doing here, what they're going to be dealing with and that they're going to be staying here.

Mary:
This came up in our previous discussion. The idea of Third Culture, halfway between, or someplace between the old way of doing things and the American way of doing things as people are adapting. People are not going to stay in one place but keep moving along a continuum being socialized. You probably have a lot of experience with that Gin working with students.

Gin:
We have a lot of requests for cultural information and our biggest caution is not to overgeneralize. And also to look at Culture. We are very unique here in this country in that we like to look at culture as if it were a book that was written three hundred years ago, instead of a process that is constantly evolving. What we are saying is the experience of Asians, or any group of people, is that they are constantly redefining and socializing in new ways. That's what culture is. It may be helpful to learn historically cultural values and cultural patterns, but to bring that bit of knowledge and then impose it on student and family experiences now would be really inaccurate and unfair because we're evolving our culture.

Bruce:
Yes. I think right now the students are the ones who have the most problem. It's not the schools or the parents. The school is trying to ask the students to do something and when they get home their parents expect something else from the children. So they are in the transitional stage, the so called confusion stage right now.

Mary:
One of our assumptions I think as people who are primary socialization agents is that the faster we can get these new students to be Americanized the better off they will be. And that Americans will like them more, the more Americanized they are. And yet, I have recently come to realize that that may not be true. I would like these people to reflect on some things they can tell us about the other side of that.

Kam One:
It is hard to put value on culture and customs. Everybody is proud of himself and proud of his own heritage. It seems that we have been focusing too much on differences and not too much on similarity. I think sometimes what we perceive to be a difference, in reality, underneath is a similarity. It is a variation in the ways we do things. I am not suggesting that you participate in your students'

cultural activities if you do not care to, but it is worth it to experience and put yourself on the other side of the table or desk and see through the eyes and taste the food or really get to know their feelings about things. It is helpful. It helps them to feel good about themselves. It makes a tremendous difference for me if you acknowledge my existence and my being worth something.

Vinh:

We all seem to agree that the notion of the United States as a melting pot is no longer true. We think that the United States is a place where there is lots of diversity and differences but at the same time we all can claim ourselves to be American. There is an overall similarity and most of the Indochinese refugees are aware of that. They know that in the new culture they need to adapt to the new culture to survive. They need to obey the law. They need to obey the new ways of life so that they can survive. But at the same time they know that they have their traditional values and they want to keep them. This is also true for all kinds of ethnic groups in the United States: the Polish, the Italian, French, English, even the Indian, the Native American. We know that we have something that makes us different from all the other ethnic groups but at the same time we know that we are American. And so now, this is not a question of assimilation, but we believe this is a question of assimilating to a certain extent that we are all American but then keep our traditional values so that we can be proud of ourselves. So that we can have a sense on self identity and at the same time we can have the same commonality, we are all American. We are not any kind of . . . "non-American".

Kam One:

Alien.

Vinh:

Yeah, alien. We are not alien. We are American. But then we can say that we are very proud to say that we are Vietnamese- American, we are Italian-American or we are British-American. That is my viewpoint about the question of assimilation.

Ben:

Yes, I do agree with my colleagues. On top of that the question of how fast should we assimilate these people, it is not a general question. It depends on each individual. Do not impose on different individuals the same expectations. Whatever he or she can do is okay. Give them time. From my experience children adapt very fast from age Ø up to about teenage. By 2Ø to 4Ø years of age it takes five to ten years. After that it is going to take more time than just 1Ø-2Ø years, that is my experience.

Gin:

Normally when I'm asked to present what is our educational approach, my thinking is that with any cultural group it is just common sense. Well, now I have revised that. I think it's common sense and an uncommon degree of sensitivity. Sure, it takes a lot more time for you and I to get to know each other, but that time is

necessary for you and I to get to know each other. It's real simple, but it takes that, for you to know who I am and me to know you.

For instance, I'm Asian-American and at this point I provide service on a lot of different issues. I am constantly asked (and I have lived here all my life), "Where did you learn to speak English so well?" [audience laughter]. Or, "No, where did you come from? Come on, tell me again, where did you come from?" And I say, "Well, I was born in Seattle, Washington." But we sometimes need those outs and I think if we are eager to have outs, we'll find them. For instance, a Southeast Asian parent might not see their role in schooling in the same way as our curriculum might demand, like active involvement. It does not mean, however, that they shirk their responsibility. The parents in the Southeast Asian culture and the American culture are acting in the same way. They are doing whatever it is they think is necessary to ensure a quality education for their child. That is no different. They approach it differently. The value is still there. Their assumption is that the teachers are to be trusted and there is no reason for them to doubt that you are operating in the best interests of their child. As American parents we might see that we need to ensure that, so we need to be more actively involved. But we're operating off of the same value; we're living it out differently.

Vinh:

I completely agree with her about that kind of conclusion in terms of dealing with Vietnamese students. We don't need to understand their culture totally, carefully. You don't need to be a Vietnamese to have sentiment and love from Vietnamese students. You let them know that you are American, but that you care and you are flexible. That's all what you need to deal with Vietnamese students.

Kam One:

I'd just like to say this, not because I think it will please you, [audience laughter] but I will say it anyway. I know you feel the impact of Reaganomics. You have been cut, you have been stripped to the bone. But I would like to challenge you to encourage help from the community. I believe that's probably the best way to help educating the parents, a little at a time. Give them an opportunity; open a door for them. Now, "Open House" is not going to help. [audience laughter] But a school meeting and things like that will help a lot.

Question from the audience:

"Do you have any suggestions on working with children who are ten or twelve years old or older and have been adopted by American families?"

Kam One:

We have had some experience working with unaccompanied minors. That is the individual, usually in their teens, that escaped the country and came to the camp somewhere in Southeast Asia, and had no relatives in the camp and was processed to come to the United States as a loner; as a single family person. He is underage and that is why he is classified by law as an unaccompanied minor who is protected by agencies who sponsor them. Somehow it is arranged that that person

end up with a family somewhere. We have had the opportunity of working with those type of clients. If they have problem learning in school also at the same time problem living in the family, you have a real problem, I don't know what to tell you. You seek counseling for that person and you need testing to determine if he is retarded or slow learning or needs special technical assistance in school. I feel that is within your reach.

Vinh:

If you have to deal with what Kham One has just said, the unaccompanied minor, be aware of the fact that these kids have a lot of problems. Because, they themselves are sent from Vietnam and they usually escaped from Vietnam alone, they enjoyed a complete freedom. They could survive in the camp. And they experienced a lot of traumatic experiences on the ocean, in the camp. And they enjoyed a complete freedom as an adult. And when they come to the United States, they become controlled again by the parent, the American parents. They have to do things exactly the way the parents tried to figure out for them to do. And so, there have been a lot of conflicts between foster American parents and the unaccompanied minors. We have dealt with a lot of them. Be aware of the fact that they belong to a particular population and that population has a lot of problems.

Question from the audience:

"As a teacher, and as an American, I view them all as one big pile of Southeast Asians and they don't see themselves that way. What can we do as teachers to get them to participate together?"

Ben:

We tend to sometimes come out with stereotypes: "Indochinese, oh they are Vietamese." That is false, that is not true at all. Because, Americans have been involved with Vietnam so much, and anything in Indochina is Vietnamese. So that's not true. Even though we do have a similarity and a general culture the same, but there are cultural diversity in each among us. We maybe eat the same rice together and maybe eat the same meat, but how well is the meat cooked, that is the difference. [audience laughter]

Gin:

I'd like to add to that. I think that in some ways you might have answered your own question. If you can, think back to yourself as an emerging young person when you were sensitive to how people felt about you. I know working with a lot of young people, they are consistently saying, "Why doesn't that person see me as an individual?" The question is, if we are treating them as if they are all the same, their reaction is: "Wait a minute, you don't then understand the subtlties, because, in fact, we're not the same. You are refusing to acknowledge my self as an individual." It could be that operating, if your students don't respond. It could be that it is not an ethnic-racial thing at all.

Bruce:

Let me also share my frank, what you call, prejudice. I think that every ethnic group in the world have the sense of feeling that: "I am better. Our group is better." And it doesn't matter where we

go, we always find that in many many parts of the world, including this country, too. I lived in New Jersey, I lived in Louisiana, in Hawaii, I saw that kind of prejudice come out. So it probably goes together with the Indochinese. When a Vietnamese sees a Laotian or see a Hmong, or see a Cambodian, they might have the same feeling. Just vice versa. So perhaps those things developed from the time, the way of life that we are living from day to day. I don't know whether there will be any solution besides the class structure and the curriculum that will help to make each other understand and accept the other rather than to pretend that you are better or you are stronger.

Vinh:

Let me share some of my experience about the question of prejudice. I don't try to answer the question because it is too big. But, whenever Vietnamese, I know that there is a high sense of suspicion of strangers in the Vietnamese culture. We have been undergoing a thousand years of Chinese domination, a hundred years of French domination and thirty years of war. And we tried to include ourselves in our family. And that is why we have a high family spirit. We don't trust any strangers, especially foreign. What we tried to do is to help each other within the same family only. But for the Vietnamese refugee in the United States there is a kind of disruption of family. All families are broken up. Some are still staying in Vietnam, some are here. And so now, there is a sense of trying to find somebody we can trust. To stick together. We don't want to try to discriminate other ethnic groups racially, but we cannot trust them right away.

One of the lessons I can tell you from my own experience, is that: I love Ben. He is a Cambodian. I love Kam One, he is a Laotian. And we love each other, we develop a sense of commonality. We work together in the same setting. And I think that we don't have a kind of racial tradition, but we do have some sense of suspicion of strangers and foreigners. So, I think that, if I were a teacher, I would like to create some sense of commonality among the ethnic groups and try to help them understand each other better. And I am pretty sure that we can live together in a friendly atmosphere. This is our own experience: Ben, Kam One and I, myself.

Question from the audience:
"Are there any safeguards against overassimilation?"

Kam One:

Overassimilation? You mean the person adapts too well and takes on the American lifestyle too fast? And forgets about the past? We are talking about a special group who are very vulnerable to all kinds of problems from outside. Like drug problems, alcohol problem, or gambling problem. All I can say, ma'am, I am aware that that kind of problem is developing but it lies within a very small group and some specific individuals.

Ben:

It is true, that no one has an answer to that.

Vinh:

I think that, mostly, the young people are quickly assimilated. And probably women, because here women can benefit a lot of rights. Back in our country, men are superior to women. And so they tend to be Americanized so that they can get more rights and have an easier life. And also probably what we can do here is create a sense of cultural identity in the school. The young people are Americanized so quickly. And if you can let them know that Americanization is not always the best. Sometimes, if you keep your tradition, that is also good. And if you encourage that kind of thing, then the chiloren may see that at home their parents try to encourage them to keep tradition and even in the school the teachers respect their tradition. If you have some kind of program or formal activity in the school that encourage the cultural diversities among the ethnic groups, that would help a lot.

PART TWO: SCHOOL AND HOME EXPECTATIONS

Mary:

Are there specific examples of things the American schools think are good things for children to learn and try to promote but that in the home environment it may be discouraged or seen as an improper thing to do?

Ben:

There is a certain new type of culture that they brought with them. A specific example: pasting and cutting the paper together are common sense skills that kids will learn as they grow up. So, when you send a kid to school and you expect education and the teacher brought the kids outside to the fieldtrip, the parents feel that that is not education; it's a play time. They don't see that as education at all. That's one misunderstanding.

Mary:

So that doesn't look like school. What would school look like if we were doing it the way they expected?

Ben:

It doesn't need any playtime. The kid can play at home, too. They can cut at home as well as they cut at school.

Mary:

So, when we ask parents to come and visit and see how we're doing, and they walk in and see the children cutting and pasting. . .

Kam One:

But the point is not the cutting and pasting. What is important is, what is the educational philosophy behind cutting paper or pasting pictures together or making books, or things like that. Some problem lies within the perceptions and the understanding of the parents on what your educational system is all about. A lot of school districts and teachers especially who try to contact the parents or the families don't seem to be able to get through to them or even introduce anything to help encouraging their participation. It is very simple to me, these people came from a totally different educational system. And, back home they were not that involved either because the government took care of everything at home. While, here, although they realize their rights and responsibility (they do what the neighbors do: send their kids to school), but in terms of understanding your own educational philosophy, you will need to work harder some way, somehow, to help them understand what you do. To attach meaning to what Ben described.

Vinh:

In terms of the conflict between the two systems, I hate to generalize things, but at least there is a general pattern of the refugees. That is, how they view things and how they conceive things and how the Americans conceive things. When it comes to verbal behaviors and other behaviors that we can observe very clearly, then, Indochinese tend to Americanize very fast. Like, how to sit, to say hello to Americans, things like that we can pick up very quickly. But, in terms of belief systems and value orientation, unconciously we

still resist against that. And so here, the American school seems to encourage individual freedom and independence in each child. While, in the school system in Vietnam, we emphasized propriety over individual freedom. And we always want to have a kind of hierarchy of the important roles in the family. And due to those kind of differences usually the parents are sometimes very resentful inside, even though they know that need to Americanize, even though they know that they are living in the new culture and if they want to survive they have to let their children adapt to the new culture. But deep in their hearts they are very resentful about the impolite behavior of their children when they come back.

They may say, "Hello, Dad!" with a casual wave of the hand as they come home. This is very, very impolite in the Vietnamese culture. And so, one of the things I would like to emphasize is that even though obvious habits can be changed very rapidly and we are very tolerant of different behavior in the new culture, but in terms of values and belief systems, they still conflict over those. We need to pay attention to that so we can gradually move the refugee adult to understand more about the new culture.

Kam One:

This can be the root of depression in both the parents and the kids. In the mental health project, we have dealt with this quite a bit where the kids adopt a new way of doing things that parents cannot tolerate, in the home, at least. It creates resentment in both people of different age groups. Parents, not necessarily because they are conservative and don't want to change, but becasue they have been growing up in a code of culture, of behavior that has been prescribed to them all along. They have had to live up to the standard. Now they feel they are failures because they can't even direct the behavior of their own kids to at least meet this standard. So it becomes a real conflict between parents and children, not because they don't want their children to learn English, or because they want to push their children to learn native language too hard, no, that's not the issue.

Ben:

With the same token, teachers sometimes are very puzzled by family behaviors. If I was a teacher and I sent Johnny home, I want to deal with his parents. But what I face is not just his parents, but his uncle, his grandmother, his aunt. I might think, "What is that. these people are very unorganized?" Without realizing that these people are raised with what we call "multiple mothering." All children grow up with the uncles looking after them, the grandfather looking after them. They all discipline some neighbor's kid. So you not only are facing the parents alone, you have to deal with all the people in the household. That is a difficulty. We [Americans] tend to be more nucleus family. We tend to be more individualistic. We say, okay, we will deal with this person as an individual. But they are not that way. They were raised with interdependency. And that is a big difference.

Bruce:

And I think another thing, too. We always emphasize on the problems that the children have. And we totally ignore the parents' side of things. What happens is that we try to train the students in any way we can to make him study, to make her study, or to behave the way we would like them to. But there is nobody who explains to the parents of what the importance of schooling is. Well, I think they know what it is. But, let's say, the importance of participating in social activities after school, after classes. The importance of getting good grades. The importance of playing basketball. I think that as I mentioned earlier, to play basketball or something like that is just playing, it is not learning. That's why they have a difficult time to deal with their children. Like I said earlier, when the children come home late, the parents tend to punish them or to scold them. On the other hand, the students want to please their teacher. They say, "But I had to stay, my teacher asked me so." Now, they are the ones who have to deal with the problem everyday.

But perhaps one solution is to work with parents. Some sort of orientation classes can be provided to parents so they will understand a little bit about the philosophical background of the American school system here. The parents need to know the dress codes for their children. Some schools are very liberal and it's okay but some are not. They also need to know the importance of completing the homework of the children. Also how to establish the certain hour to help their kids at home. It is not that they do not know these things. Some of them do have education in their former country and some of them don't.

A lot of times, back home, the teacher had the total responsibility. If you don't do your homework, you are punished by the teacher, not punished by the parents. And here, the parents have the tendency to feel that, whatever happens, it is your teacher's fault, it is not my fault as a parent. The teachers here, on the other hand, expect you to go home and finish your homework and bring back your assignment tomorrow. Our parents need to know these things. They also need to know the importance of the parent- teacher contact. Again, because they used to give full authority to the teacher, and here it is different.

Many of the Indochinese, particularly the Hmong, who do not understand English and do not read English, they ignore the notice from school. Whenever the child bring something home they just say, "I cannot read it" and just put it aside and throw it away. We have to teach them about these things. And probably the biggest one is about the subjects and credits at school and the philosophy, the goals and objectives of the school. I think that all the parents seem to put too much emphasis on the school and teachers' responsibility and do not seem to have the knowledge they need to take the responsibility expected of parents here.

Gin:

I'd like to switch off from being an Asian at this point and talk as a school person. I think I have been pretty successful in providing an atmosphere where many cultures can be respected in a classroom. Actually, all of us are multicultural. There are clearly

things that we would do in one setting that we would not do in another setting. Across ethnicities. What I as a teacher need to do then, is to provide an environment where I am not forcing a student to choose. I need to be aware of the values of that home culture and I need to frame my comments in a way that a student realizes that there are various cultural values and I am not making a value judgment when I say what is appropriate here, or what isn't appropriate for there. Because I wouldn't want to put students in a position where in order to cooperate with me as a teacher they have to deny the views of their parents. Students need to learn that the school setting may emphasize different values than the home, but that the home values are not necessarily wrong.

Mary:

An example might be useful here. Bruce, you had an example of adolescent Hmong females with different expectations from school and from home.

Bruce:

Yes. Particularly in the Hmong families. We can almost divide it into two groups: the daughters and the sons. The sons are probably more permitted to participate in the other activities. But the daughters are treated more strictly. The parents want them to come home on time. At a certain time of the day they will have to be home to help with the family chores, to help mother to cook or take care of the children. These also conflict with school activities.

The Hmong family does not expect children to think of their own future. It is like the children's future is planted in their minds. They kind of condition the child to act as they wish, not as he wants or she wants. That way, if I want my son to be a teacher, then from the time that he is born, I will continuously tell him, you're going to be a teacher, you're going to be a teacher. Then he conditions himself to become a teacher. If you want him to be a doctor, it is the same situation. When we put these children into overliberal situations in American classes, they say, "The teacher doesn't teach me anything, he doesn't tell me what to do, and doesn't tell me where I can go from here, so I have no idea what I'm going to be." This is another confusion that the children get.

Kam One:

Part of my concern is because I share this highly valued constitutional guarantee for civil rights and equality and everything. I think it has been very fortunate that our children, these Indochinese refugees, have been afforded these luxurious activities and educational programs. But, that doesn't solve the basic problem. The basic problem may be signaled to you through nonverbal cues. For example, you don't seem to be able to understand the specific need of the individual student that you are trying to work with. Or he is not capable of communicating back to you in however way you stimulate or try to test out what he's interested in, what he's good at. That could be explained in many ways, but my explanation for that is that you need to really emphasize the testing for placement. Our children come from very diverse backgrounds. Some came from semi-middleclass where they could afford schooling. Some came from a real poor class

where they didn't have access to schooling. Or some came from very high class where they could afford very good schooling system; they paid for it with their own money. If you try to make American educational system work under such circumstances, if you try to match it with the student's background I think you will eliminate the waste of time and money. I am concerned about this issue.

Mary:

One of the things that I recall from our previous conversation was the difficulty, especially among high school students, about making choices for courses that they are expected to make. The couselor will sit and say, "Well, it is up to you, what courses would you like to take next term or next year or what college would you like to go to." And the student is saying, "Tell me what to do." Everybody is sitting there wondering what to do next.

Vinh:

Let me share something about that. The notion of being independent and completely free to choose is an alien concept for Vietnamese. Usually we develop a sense of high interdependence in the family. Whenever we want to decide something we consult with all the family members and then we do it. If that's a failure, then the whole family suffers. If it's a success the whole family share that success. It is not individual freedom or complete independence. So that's why, when before a counselor a Vietnamese student is asked to choose, usually he believes that the counselor knows better than he himself and the counselor likes him. So, if the counselor can choose for him, that would be the best. And, naturally, he wants the counselor to be responsible for that choice. [audience laughter] And in terms of your values, you don't want to take responsibility for the client or the student. You just want to give him the freedom as well as avoid your responsibility. And that's the conflict.

And so, when we do counseling sometimes we have to compromise the two approaches. Sometimes we do have to take responsibility for our clients, to a certain extent. And sometimes we do try to develop a sense of independence and freedom in our clients. So, my suggestion is that we need to be flexible. We cannot just be culturally encapsulated and think that the students MUST choose for themselves. Sometimes we have to choose for them to a certain extent. That is my own bias. I do not know whether it is proper for you to do that or not. But usually when I do counseling I do have to do that.

One thing I would like to mention about the notion of Third Culture that Ben mentioned: One of the most important questions is the degree of westernization in <u>each</u> Indochinese. It's a continuum. Some Indochinese are very westernized. And some are not westernized at all. It depends on the length of time in the United States and also depends on the education they had in their homeland. For example, when you talk about Vietnamese you have to distinguish the two big groups: those who came here in 1975 and those who are Boat People.

The people who came here in 1975 are usually educated people and that is why they are influenced by Chinese culture. That means,

propriety is more important than sincerity. And usually you will hear your students say "Yes" to you all the time. [audience laughter] That means they want to tell you what you want to hear rather than to be sincere with you. The interpersonal relationship is more important than sincerity for them. And that's traditional Vietnamese culture and also Chinese culture. But, if you deal with children of Boat People, they are different. They are very open; they are very sincere. They tell you what they want and sometimes they are overdemanding. And so, there should be a distinction between the two groups.

Also, the length of time in the United States sometimes makes some Indochinese very Americanized. For example, I have a case in which a child of about 15 years old is now too Americanized, so Americanized that his mother became very depressed and she even wants to commit suicide because of his insolent behavior. He just goes out of the house and spends the night in another home with his girlfriend even though he is only 15 years old. That kind of thing should be taken into consideration.

Kam One:

I think it is also important to realize that there is a role reversal going on in the family. We have to think in terms of your own students being a great resource to help getting through to the parents with the language skills that the children learn at a faster rate, you have a resource at hand, already.

Gin:

I'd like to underscore the support for parent orientation and parent training. I get the opportunity to visit school districts throughout the northwest region. You don't have as many problems in large urban areas where you have a lot of native language speakers that can be of assistance. But in a lot of the smaller districts, a lot of school personnel just haven't thought about what is going on. To give you an example in one school district locally, the Hmong families were not aware of school emergencies. And so, during the recent snow days, several of those families stood outside and waited in the snow and there was nobody on staff in that particular school district who could communicate well enough to explain that the schools were closed because of the snow. The families were out there the whole day. Everybody thinks that's an atrocity. But we need to back up.

I don't think that any parent or teacher is wanting to shirk from their responsibility in a partnership to support education for their child. But what needs to happen first is a clear articulation of what the role is. There are all these simple things to learn. The families range from being very educated to not even having been in a school building before and not knowing that there is a cafeteria or how the bathrooms work. We need to do our homework and find out what the families know and what it is that they understand. When someone says we sent a notice home and no one came to the PAC [Parent Advisory Council] meeting, we need to step back a little and do a little bit more work to build that partnership to make it happen.

Vinh:

Let me share a little bit about the roles of parents back in Vietnam and how they view the schools. I was teaching in Vietnam for ten years and I know how the parents usually view the school over there. Usually, the Vietnamese parents think that education, I mean academic education, is in the hand of the teacher, and they don't need to care about that. The duty of the teacher is to teach the children academic stuff. And naturally sports or activities are considered as playing and they don't trust that kind of thing. Back at home the parents educate the children how to be good in terms of morality, only. Also, the teachers are supposed to teach morality to the students, too. But in terms of academic education, this is the duty of the school and the parents don't have to pay attention to that. And they just give it to the school people.

Parents rarely attend meetings held by the school. Because they say that they don't know anything about teaching, they don't know anything about education. They say, "You are experts; you learn about children so you can do that." Even though we try to encourage them to come to the school and share with us about how to improve the situation, they never came. And it happens here too, probably. [audience laughter] That's the kind of habit that the Vietnamese parents usually have in terms of dealing with the school.

PART THREE: USING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES AS INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS

Mary:

What kind of hints can you give us about using students and other nonprofessionals as bilingual translators in our communications with Southeast Asian refugee families?

Kam One:

For your awareness I have some comments regarding the ideal bilingual helper that you should recruit or use. I have experience using bilingual Hmong who help me because I don't speak Hmong. I have functioned as a bilingual helper in a school setting. Here is my experience.

Ideally you should have a technically trained person who knows the curriculum, who knows the work that you need to get done, rather than just somebody who speaks the language. It works two ways: for your benefit for accuracy and also to serve as a realiable helper for the family that you are working with. Because our people tend to look on those more sophisticated individuals as a more reliable source. They really trust each other. So if more is done to inform and train that individual bilingual helper it is better. If you can't recruit one, you are going to have to solicit help from a nearby district. I think our tax money should be spent wisely.

Bruce:

For those who just arrived, perhaps the best way is to use a member of the ethnic group who has been at the school for a certain time, along with another American student and assign the two of them to help the newly arrived student for a period of certain months until he gets used to the different subjects, customs, practices of the school.

One of the problems I have seen is that back in our country, of course we were a poor country and the whole class just sit there all day in the same place. Here, from time to time you switch classes from A to C or C to 10 or whatever. The newly arrived student does not really get used to this new kind of system and sometimes it is very confusing for them.

Ben:

I'd like to caution with using the interpreters. Kam One mentioned a good example. You sould be sensitive to the home that you are using as your interpreter with your client. If the interpreter is not trained enough to be aware on the situation, or not trained enough to know the subtle cultural differences, he might not be telling you what you want to hear. They are only telling you whatever you want to hear that they <u>want</u> to tell you. [audience laughter] That's very important. But again, not using an interpreter may be a greater risk.

It is important to know the value beliefs of the persons you use as interpreters. Get to know his personality. Work with him and get to know him better so you can trust his judgments. Then you have a very good idea what to expect from him in different situations.

Mary:
It sounds like training is an important part of using interpreters in a school setting. We need to work on things that we can do to help interpreters do their jobs better.

Kam One:
Right. I have another point of concern. I am sure that many of you administrators, school principals, and especially physical education teachers must have gone through a lot of painful experience with our young girls or the young men in a locker room situation. I am aware of that. But also I would like you to know that these youngsters are not used to taking a shower in a group like that or changing clothes in a locker room. The fear of exposing the body is over all fear to them. It's embarrassing.

Another point is that you should try to pair up some other students to ease them in. By pairing up with Aerican students who might develop along the way a special relationship to help our students understand this concept so they can overcome this mind block. But I have seen the youngsters, our young girls who are willing to fail P.E. rather than changing clothes and taking showers and things like that. It is unfortunate. But it is some kind of task that you have to help with.

Mary:
If schools don't have bilingual people on their staff, or if there are five different languages among the school children and not all the languages are represented on the staff, what are some of the resources school people can use? Is it a good idea to call on people from the community that you know have knowledge of both languages even though they are not professionally trained? What are some things we need to be aware of if we call on people we don't know to translate for us in school related situations?

Vinh:
I think that usually the Vietnamese believe that those who have the English skill are more important than those people who don't have it. And an interpreter, without being trained, usually is on the side of the teacher or the person that comes with him to speak to the parents. He or she usually wants to satisfy the teacher rather than to try to facilitate communication. Sometimes, some Vietnamese interpreters even threaten the parents to accept something that they think will satisfy the teacher. That's happened already. I want to caution that you need to talk with the interpreter beforehand. Let him know that the main purpose is to facilitate communication and to be very sincere so that you can understand the parents, rather than to try to impose something on the parents or rather than to try to convince the parents to do something. That is one of the cautions I want you to know.

Bruce:
I agree with that totally.

Mary:
We sometimes find ourselves in an emergency situation where we are using a student to explain something to a parent. And yet we cannot be sure that that student is equally trusted by parent and teacher. Just because we school people trust the English level of the student does not necessarily mean that the parent trusts what the student is saying.

Ben:
Sometimes we as bilingual counselors have been in an American psychiatric setting where most of our clients are females and would not share their personal feelings with us. But, because it is an American psychiatric atmosphere where they are expected to talk about such things, they do.

Mary:
So, the setting can be an important aspect of the communication.

Ben:
Yes.

Mary:
In relation to that, in terms of trying to obtain the best possible communication, do the interpreter, teacher and student go out to the home, or do you invite parents to come to the school where you can set things up the way you want them to be? What kinds of things can happen either way?

Vinh:
I think that customarily the parents do not want to go to school. It is kind of like something bad is happening and I as a parent would feel shameful. If you go to the home, that would be better. Because sometimes we Vietnamese teachers would go to the students' homes, not to talk about academic things but just to be friendly with the family only. We do not often talk about academic achievement or school problems at the home. That is a difference between the school system in the United States and the school system at home. Because we are entirely responsible totally for the education of the student in terms of academics. But if we need to cooperate with the parents to help the student to be better in terms of morality, then sometimes we have to deal with the parents at the home. And so, here, if you want to get cooperation from the parents, I think it would be better and easier if you would go to their homes rather than invite them to come to the school because it is not customary in Vietnam. If they are not westernized enough, they might refuse or feel shameful when they are invited.

Kam One:
I don't want to explain your responsibility for you, but, aside from what Vinh has mentioned, one way is to reach out to parents. If you have a highly skilled community liaison you can use that person in that way, reaching out to the home. Or you can go with the teacher, maybe using a goal sheet or evaluation sheet the way Bruce suggested. Another way you can solicit help is to realize that the source of help could exist in the refugee community itself. I am not suggesting that

you should take anyone you just happen to meet. But sort of feel around, ask around among refugee people about who is a reliable, caring person who is interested in education. I think that you would be able to pair up with them to your mutual benefit. They will be able to help you and you don't have to pay. [audience laughter]

Bruce:

I was just thinking that if you have to go to parents in a legal way, that you must have employee who can help, then perhaps you don't have to hire every ethnic group in your school, but maybe you can share the individual in such a way that each district or school would hire one ethnic person and you could borrow the person in time of need. I think that has been done in some other states. You just hire six persons to cover all ethnic groups in some central agency then you can call them whenever you need them, and those persons will run around. That would help a lot.

Question from the audience:

"What dangers should we be aware of when using interpreters who see language as power?"

Vinh:

All the refugees are aware of the importancce of English and are striving to learn the second language, including the children in the school. When you use an interpreter, you will see that the interpreter himself sees that he is an important person as a go-between of the teacher and the students in the class or the parents at home. And in ESL classes I think that you can take advantage of that attitude to encourage the students to learn more, and you can even use one of the students who learns English faster than other students to help other students. You can put them in an important position. And you can divide into groups to help each other. At the same time, you as the teacher need to talk to those particularly advanced English students about the bias that may occur in himself or herself. Usually, even in a group, when a student can speak English better than other students, he or she may view himself or herself as the leader of the group, and instead of trying to help other students in the class, he or she might exert a kind of power and try to influence the teacher or even cheat the teacher to get better grades or more attention. I think that is a common occurrence in any process of interpretation.

If the interpreter understands well his role as a go-between and as a facilitator of communication, that would be the best. A good interpreter is aware of his role. He knows he is not the VIP in the process. Also, the other students need to be trained to see the interpreter as a facilitor of the communication rather than a person that is on the side of the authority: the teacher or the counselor. The same is true in any setting, whether it is a school setting or at home.

Kam One:

I'd like to mention something that is critical if you use a bilingual person to translate a class lesson for you. That person needs to be aware of the subject matter itself. If he is inadequate in the subject matter, it will not work. I am not saying that you are

doing it, but I imagine it is one possibility of what is going on some places. Those of you who know more than language know that you can never get one hundred percent accuracy in terms of equivalence. That could mislead the students, or flunk the class, and you don't understand, and nobody is responsible. That is a potential danger. The helpful thing in using a bilingual assistant for a class or in a tutorial process is to pick and choose the persons based on the background and the skill level of the bilingual individual.

Bruce:

I think confidentiality has to play some role, too. Many times the Hmong, and not just the Hmong, they do not want other people to know how bad their sons or daughters are. When you come with an interpreter there, that interpreter is already viewed as a third person who can discover what the relationships in the family are. And sometimes they are very reluctant to tell you the truth or tell you exactly what they would like to say. Another way to deal with it is an agency with a good reputation among the families, or social organization in the community that are already in existance could suggest a reasonable person to act as interpreter for the family.

Ben:

I'd like to add to what Vinh said about power. We must keep in mind that most of these people who escaped from their country had been enduring psychological oppression under authoritarian conditions. They resist authoritarian types of people. If for some reason, the interpreter does not clearly identify his role to the refugees as a facilitator between the two parties, then the client may feel the interpreter is a kind of authority and would resist against them. Then the counseling process would not work well at all.